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ABSTRACT

Educators and policymakers find themselves confronted with how to address the issue of children "pre-disposed to failure." This paper contends that teachers and politicians are linked in a chain of responsibility that forces them to construct a common discourse through which they may share their views, and with which they may productively enact their proposals. These interest groups frame their discourse around the conceptualization of students "at risk." The dominant characterization of these students is made in accordance with a "deficit model," wherein the student at risk is viewed as embodying a specific set of traits that pre-dispose the child to fail in school. Educational discourse correlates risk with behavioral, socio-economic, and ethnic-linguistic traits. The paper undertakes a critical assessment of the prevailing deficit model from a Freirean perspective. Questions taken up are: (1) "To what extent are educators and policymakers wrongly conceiving the phenomenon of students at risk?;" (2) "How does Paulo Freire's notion of 'false generosity' (in "Pedagogy of the Oppressed") provide the right critique?;" (3) "What is the Freirean alternative?" and (4) "What are the ethical payoffs that derive from that alternative?" The paper considers whether the tendency to false generosity can be overcome and true liberatory education engaged in. It concludes by examining this question and suggesting steps that can be taken to engender an educational practice that is truly generous. (Contains nine references). (NKA)

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Running Head: "False Generosity" At Risk

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"Students at risk": The Discourse of False Generosity

"REPORT SHOWS HOPE FOR ILLINOIS CHILDREN MOST AT RISK"

This headline, taken from a recent newspaper article, announces a serious situation for children. The report refers to an annual assessment made by Voices for Illinois Children, a legislative advocacy group that works to direct attention and money to the plight of children living in the state of Illinois. The headline alone tells half the story; there are children who face some form of peril; some are worse off than others; this is a situation which demands our *hope*; there are people working on the problem; the children cannot speak for themselves. The report, released in January 1997, calls our attention to the adverse conditions under which large numbers of Illinois children begin the long road to maturation. The report cites a series of alarming statistics. For example, one in seven children in Illinois are born to single, teenage mothers who have not completed a high school degree, cases of child abuse and neglect are on the rise (an increase of 28% between 1993 and 1995), and "many at-risk youngsters aren't getting the pre-kindergarten schooling they need to jump-start their education" (Report shows hope, 1997, p. 4A).

Headlines like this one and the story it announces are all too common today. They alarm us by pointing out a growing phenomenon; children pre-disposed to failure. Educators, parents, politicians and children themselves recognize that there is a problem. The attempt to understand, explain and communicate this problem has resulted in the coining of a new term and the construction of new category; the "at-risk student." Along with increased awareness there is growing frustration with our failure to improve this situation. The Oakland school board's now infamous Ebonics initiative epitomizes the

depth of despair that surround this issue. While many were quick to denounce this move on the part of the school board, even critics could agree that the board's call for change was justified.

In response to frustrated initiatives and alarming headlines, educators and policy makers find themselves confronted with the task of how to address these issues. Teachers and politicians are linked in a chain of responsibility that forces them to construct a common discourse through which they may share their views, and with which they may productively enact their proposals. In light of the political pressure to find common ground, these interest groups have come to frame their discourse around the conceptualization of students "at risk." The dominant characterization of these students is made in accordance with a "deficit model," which seeks to understand the risk these students face as originating in a nexus of cognitive, behavioral, socio-economic, and ethnic-linguistic deficiencies.

The student at risk, according to the deficit model, is viewed as embodying a specific set of traits that pre-dispose the child to fail in school. In the case of cognitive deficiency, these students are labeled "LD" or "learning-disabled." The problems associated with this label are many and would take up an entire volume of critical essays to unpack. Instead, I would like to focus my remarks on the ways in which our educational discourse correlates risk with behavioral, socio-economic, and ethnic-linguistic traits. An illustrative example is a study by Chesebro, et al. (1992) in which the authors cite a 1990 report by the National Center for Education Statistics. The report identifies six "primary risk factors" and indicates the percentage of students associated with each: single parent family (22%), an annual family income of less than $15,000

(21%), home alone more than three hours a day (14%), parents have not completed a high school degree (11%), has a sibling who has dropped out of school (10%), and has limited proficiency with English (2%).

In addition to the criteria cite above, Chesebro, et al. identify two additional risk factors: an "urbanization" factor based on the 1990 report cited above in which inner city dropout rates (6.2%) were higher than those of suburban (3.7%) or rural students (4.0%), and racial and ethnic differences correlated with higher and lower dropout rates (6.8% for African Americans, 7.9% for Hispanics, and 4.1% for Caucasians). These authors also report that "at-risk students encounter unique communication problems [related to] unusually high rates of limited English proficiency [and] nonstandard language variations or dialects" (p. 347). Risk has been measured in other studies in terms of failing grades (Frymier, et al., 1992), communication apprehension (Chesebro, et al., 1992; Rosenfeld, Grant, & McCroskey, 1995; Johnson, Staton, & Jorgensen-Earp, 1995), membership in a minority group that is "racially, linguistically, or socially partitioned from the mainstream or majority culture" (Presseisen, 1988), and an external locus of control (Nunn & Parish, 1992; Gorham & Self, 1986).

There are serious moral and political implications in viewing students "at risk" as embodying a set of deficiencies. One result is that well meaning folks, parents, teachers, politicians, and students, seek remedies to compensate for situational deficits. This was the hope of the Oakland school board; that by embracing the vernacular of black students, schools would mitigate the risk that this ethnic-linguistic trait posed for students. In Illinois forty percent of the children who qualify for Head Start or similar pre-kindergarten programs do not attend because there is not enough money to support their

participation. Yet, only four years ago, over sixty percent of those eligible could not be supported in those programs (Report shows hope, 1997). Despite our efforts to provide assistance, study after study suggests that we are losing the battle to remove the risks children face.

In light of our failure, we need to ask whether or not we have rightly conceptualized the student "at risk." In this paper I plan to undertake a critical assessment of the prevailing deficit model from a Freirean perspective. In particular, I will employ Freire's notion of "false generosity" to discuss the difficulty which arises when we question the ethics of an oppressive system which attempts to "soften" the effect of its oppression through various forms of social welfare. I will restrict my comments in this regard to the educational context for obvious reasons. The questions I take up in the following sections are:

1-- To what extent are educators and policy makers wrongly conceiving the phenomenon of students at risk?

2-- How does Freire's notion of "false generosity" provide the right critique?

3-- What is the Freirean alternative?

4-- What are the ethical payoffs that derive from that alternative?

1. Do we understand what it means to be "at risk?"

According to the deficit model, to be at risk means to embody a set of deficits. If the deficits can be removed or mitigated the student should no longer face the hazard. If we consider this appraisal critically some interesting facets of the model come to light. First, in the educational context, to be at risk means to be pre-disposed to fail school. The "at-risk student" finds himself or herself faced with a real dilemma. Before we can

unpack this dilemma and all its implications we need to consider that education, broadly, and democratically conceived, must be a process that prepares students to succeed in the pursuits they choose. Therefore, the dilemma may be revealed in the following question: how is it possible that the student can be at risk to fail the very mechanism that has been set in place to insure that they do not fail in what counts the most, the life they choose? I think the essential deficit in the deficit model of the "at-risk student" is that it completely misappropriates the goal of education in a democratic society. The goal of education cannot rightly or ethically be conceived as *the successful negotiation of the educational system itself.* This is what is essentially wrong with the way educators and politicians have conceived students at risk. While some children may truly be at risk to fail in the life they choose [this leaves aside the question of what it means to choose a life, and who really gets to make such a choice], it is entirely immoral and savage to offer them a system of education that is instituted in such a way that they are always already pre-disposed to fail in it as well.

Conservatives respond to this charge and say that it will not do to lower standards. Although I am in favor of "great expectations," I do not agree that standards and failure need to be inextricably linked. High standards are important and should be maintained. Yet, students must not be conceived as failing when they do not meet or exceed those standards. It seems that conservatives are worried that if we do not fail students the system will suffer. We will loose our competitive edge in the global economy. This *real politik* perspective completely undermines the possibility that education must serve the needs of the student. There is a distinctly anti-humanist agenda implicit in this view and it prevails in both conservative criticisms about educational standards as well as in liberal

programs based on a deficit model of the student at risk. In the following section I would like to offer an alternative view which exposes the immorality of the dominant educational paradigm.

2. "False generosity" as right critique

The prevailing conceptualization of students "at risk" inscribes them within a cruel double jeopardy such that they are twice disposed to failure. In response to similarly "de-humanizing" conditions in South America, Paulo Freire dedicated himself to revealing the savagery and oppression that is produced and re-produced through wrong conceptualizations of the educational enterprise. Freire, in 1970 [1993/1997], published a small book with an immense message. The book is titled Pedagogy of the Oppressed and its message is one based in love, faith, humility, dialogue, trust, and hope. Freire's approach is radical in that it attempts to break the vicious circularity that inscribes students "at risk" in a condition of hopelessness and despair. His perspective offers educators and policy makers in North America an alternative that suggests the possibility of overcoming the overwhelming impotence of our own democratic liberalism. The hope and promise of this Freirean approach originates in a dialogic encounter between students and teachers. This perspective is most often referred to as a "critical pedagogy."

Freire's approach begins by identifying what he calls our "ontological and historical vocation," which is to become [always a process of *becoming*] fully human. In his view this vocation, to become more fully human, is not in anyway guaranteed. It is a process that can only be realized in a "concrete historical situation" where persons liberate themselves in order that they may take up their essential vocation to become

human. This vocation, however, is often blocked, according to Freire, by the oppressive contradictions of the concrete historical situation. Oppression is, in Freire's view, the blocking of persons from taking up their only true vocation, to become fully human. Education, for Freire, is a practice that allows for persons to engage fully and genuinely in this vocation. In this respect, education is inimical to the oppressive forces or conditions that block persons from entering into the work of becoming more fully human. The Freirean perspective suggests that all education should be a "pedagogy of the oppressed."

Freire's view is radically different from the democratic liberalism we inherited from the Enlightenment. In the Freirean view, we are not born fully human. Humanity is a process of becoming, and it is clear that we are always in-process. Becoming human is always a work in-progress. We never arrive. It is our vocation, historically and ontologically[1], to be freely engaged in this never-ending process, a process unending both for the individual and for succeeding generations. In contrast, the liberal-democratic tradition assumes that we are born fully human with a compliment of inalienable rights. The goal of a social order, in this view, is to allow free expression of our humanity while at the same time safeguarding the rights that compliment that endowment. This view is quite different than the one Freire offers. I hope to show that in light of our current conceptualizations of students at risk Freire's perspective offers the right critique and the possibility for overcoming the cruel jeopardy imposed by liberalism's practice of "false generosity."

[1] The historical and ontological are two scales; the latter denotes the development of the individual person as a process of becoming; the former denotes a generational process of becoming.

What is meant by "false generosity?" This is a term introduced by Freire in the first chapter of Pedagogy of the Oppressed. He submits that "any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor in deference to the weakness of the oppressed almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity" (1997, p. 26). He goes on to explain the insidious quality of such action:

> indeed, the attempt never goes beyond this...in order to have the continued opportunity to express their "generosity," the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well...An unjust social order is the permanent fount of this "generosity," which is nourished by death, despair, and poverty. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. True generosity consists precisely in fighting to destroy the causes which nourish false charity. False charity constrains the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands. True generosity lies in striving so that these hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work and, working, transform the world. (pp. 26-27)

Taken in the context of the prevailing conceptualization of students "at risk," Freire's perspective is a condemnation that strikes at the core the dominant educational paradigm.

To explain how the notion of false generosity becomes a powerful critique of the deficit model it will be necessary to re-frame the model in Freirean terms. First, we must re-conceptualize the student who, according to the deficit model, embodies specific situational deficiencies. In a Freirean scheme we are unable to distinguish these students from any others. All students are engaged in a process of liberating themselves from the

oppression that prevents them from taking up the project of becoming more fully human. All students embody the contradictions of their concrete historical situation. Living in a single parent home with a low income does not make the contradictions any greater. Likewise, if our family is more or less intact and well-off financially, the essential contradiction of our situation is no less a contradiction. Rather, these material conditions reflect the concrete historical situations that are variable in accordance with class, race, sex, age, etc. The essential contradiction, however, that we are oppressed, does not vary across these axes.

In contrast, our liberal-democratic tradition sees these students as distinct, set off from the rest of us. In this view, the student "at risk," already fully endowed with his or her humanity and its compliment of rights, is seen as lacking something other than their basic humanity. What they are lacking is taken to be something more *instrumental*, some tools, or skills. Indeed, such skills and tools are much easier to procure than something like an essential vocation to become more fully human. In this sense, our liberal tradition disposes us to see students "at risk" as lacking something instrumental, rather than something essential. Now this is an important difference. If we view the student "at risk" as lacking something like a tool or set of tools, we are inclined to think that the problem is more or less a matter of finding what tool is missing and supplying it. This conceptualization is misleading and allows us to overlook the much more essential problem, the fact that students who are at risk of failing school are at risk of being prevented from taking up their true, genuine vocation to become fully human. The deficit model of students at risk engenders a kind of false generosity that perpetuates the

oppressive, concrete historical situations that cruelly and doubly bind them from achieving their own humanity.

Within the Freirean perspective, we must also consider the concrete historical situations in which students at risk find themselves. I am speaking now of the socio-economic and ethnic-linguistic conditions which researchers have identified as root causes that place students at risk. The important question, particularly in light of Freire's indictment of false generosity, is this: Why do we continue to locate risk in the student and not in the concrete historical situation? The answer is obvious; it is easier, more convenient, and less troubling to ignore the conditions that place students at risk, and attend instead to the possibilities that arise through false generosity. We can ignore the moral and political dimensions of the problem by conceptualizing it as an "educational" one. In this way our false generosity is masked as genuine, and we can approach the difficulty with an unrestrained missionary zeal. This is a profound and hopeless invention of democratic-liberalism, for it provides, as Freire suggests, an unlimited fount of misery and despair. Yet, at the same time it places no restriction on the amount and kind of effort good intentioned Protestants might undertake in the name of Charity.

3. A Freirean alternative

I introduced Freire's perspective by calling it radical, and indeed it is. Because it is inimical to the liberal-democratic tradition, it is difficult to incorporate within the common discourse we have constructed to formulate and carry out our pluralist agendas. In fact, it is in large part due to this rhetorical inheritance that we are unable to recognize

the false generosity that keeps us from engaging in what Freire would call true liberatory practices.

So what is the Freirean alternative? Can we indeed transcend the contradictions of our current historical situation? Can we re-conceptualize the student "at risk" in a way that does not entrap them further in a cycle of poverty and despair? These are the difficult questions and the answers, as I have already suggested, require radical departures from prevailing conceptions of students and the education systems that serve them. It has already been indicated that a Freirean perspective begins with a radical re-orientation to history and humanity. For Freire, we begin the life project, not with an already formed humanity with its compliment of rights. Rather, we begin with a concrete historical situation that is always already fully entwined in its own contradictions. It is from this beginning point that persons may take up their historical and ontological vocation to *become* more fully human. However, among the contradictions that constitute every concrete historical situation there is the fact of oppression. As Freire points out:

> Any situation in which 'A' objectively exploits 'B' or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression…Such a situation in itself constitutes violence, even when sweetened by false generosity, because it interferes with the individual's ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human." (p. 37)

If we consider the socio-economic and ethnic-linguistic conditions that, according to the deficit model pre-dispose the child to failure, we can easily recognize these as conditions of oppression in the Freirean view. However, in this view, the fact of oppression contains

the essential possibility for the student's true and genuine liberation. From the Freirean perspective, it is precisely the purpose of education to transform the limits of the historical situation through a systematic critical reflection on the essential contradictions of that situation. Therefore, it is inhuman and immoral to conceptualize education in such a way that the material conditions in which some students find themselves should pre-dispose them to failure in school. On the contrary, it is precisely the material conditions, and the contradictions these conditions manifest, that hold the seed to the possibility of a true and genuine education; an education that liberates students from oppression and transforms their world.

The question, then, is not whether it is possible to remove the conditions that pre-dispose these children to failure. The question is whether or not we can overcome our tendency to false generosity and engage in true liberatory education. In light of this critique a number of questions can be raised. Should we be content to issue reports on the state of our children in the hope that some money can be diverted in their direction? Should we continue to conceptualize poor children as deficient beings in need of some adjustment? Should our schools continue to impose standards that serve the needs of Late Capitalism in light of an increasingly competitive global marketplace? Or should we seek an alternative? Should we consider the possibility that our schools could serve children rather than markets? Is it possible to retain high standards and at the same time abolish the notion of failure within our schools?

These questions, as important and difficult as they are, can, I think, be collapsed productively into a single question: how can the practice of education become an act of true generosity? As Freire points out, "[t]rue generosity consists precisely in fighting to

destroy the causes which nourish false charity" (p. 27). I have argued above that the prevalence of the deficit model of students "at risk" nourishes our tendency to false generosity. The first step, then, in the struggle to engender an educational practice that is truly generous, truly charitable, would be to begin with a critical dismantling of the hegemony which the deficit view currently enjoys. In some sense we have already taken this step in the preceding argument. Still, there remains much dismantling left to do.

While it will not be possible in the scope of this paper to take up in any exhaustive way these additional steps, it will be useful to outline the directions this effort must take. First, we must make a critical assessment of the assumptions and pre-dispositions that support the wide acceptance of the deficit model itself. I have already indicated in my arguments above that there is a relationship between our liberal-democratic tradition and the appeal this model holds out to us. I am suggesting, along with Freire, that we need to make a critical assessment of our core beliefs regarding self-hood. We may begin with the following question: If, in accordance with democratic-liberalism, our humanity (with its compliment of rights) is fully given at birth, what then is our historical and ontological vocation? How do we regard, and therefore value, the projects that consume our energies and ultimately our lives? Is there a *telos* that guides our actions? This seems to be the core question, and the answer we give will tell us a great deal about the moral framework in which we take up more specific questions regarding the practice of education. The point is that in the absence of teleology (the fact or character of being directed toward an end or shaped by a purpose) we set ourselves adrift in a sea of social actions without a moral framework. In my view, this characterizes the concrete historical situation in which we currently find ourselves. As

such, we are hopeless in our attempts to find the moral purchase that will allow us to restrain the savage amoral force of late capitalism that seems to have swallowed us so completely. The radical quality of a Freirean alternative lies precisely in its demand to interrogate our core beliefs.

A second critical assessment must be directed at our beliefs concerning the goal and purpose of education. Depending on where we arrive after having critically interrogated our core beliefs about person-hood and the historical and ontological project of life, there is no question that our view of the purpose of education will vary accordingly. Say, for example, we cling stubbornly to a liberal-democratic tradition in which persons are viewed as always already complete in their humanity and in possession of a set of inalienable rights. In light of this view, what moral or ethical framework exists through which we can assess the actions of another person and the actions we take toward them? In this perspective, moral or ethical action is determined according to an *infringement of rights criterion* whereby actions can be deemed moral or ethical insofar as they do not infringe on the rights of other individuals. The regulation of social order then becomes a legal process through which this criterion is applied and enforced. Again, this seems to fairly accurately characterize our current historical situation; you can get away with anything as long as you have the legal resources to engage the system through which this ideology is enacted.

The dominance of this ideology within our educational discourse produces the absence of any moral framework within which to assess our core beliefs about the goal of education. Education, like all our other practices, becomes simply another technology, a means to some end. What is so wrong in all of this is that we are left without a

framework that allows us to critically assess those ends. The value of an educational practice is measured in terms of the extent to which it allows us to achieve other ends. Yet the purposes to which we set ourselves are left unexamined and unchallenged. The Freirean alternative requires us to critically challenge not only our means, but our ends as well. It demands this critique, but also provides a moral framework in which to carry it out.

The goal of education, in the Freirean view, fully reflects the *telos* that guides all human being; liberation from oppression. That is our moral framework. That is our telos, and that is the goal of education. In this alternate view, there is no possibility of failure. Students cannot be "at risk" to fail because the educational project is one that defines their very existence as human being. This radical re-orientation is resisted by the common discourse we have constructed to produce and re-produce our liberal-democratic ideology. It is remarkable that while we are consistently reminded of how this ideology fails us, we cling to it so absolutely that we are incapable of its critique. The Freirean alternative, which gives us the moral purchase to step outside this hegemonic formation, is grounded in a reflection on the concrete historical situation and the contradictions inherent within it. In the first instance, this critical reflection reveals the contradiction of our own oppression. We are not born free. We are not born equal. We are born into a condition of oppression. Yet, we are also born into a condition in which the possibility of liberation is also present. Critical reflection will uncover this contradiction. Still, how this contradiction is manifest in each historical situation varies, and it is because of this variation that we require a "pedagogy of the oppressed."

The Freirean alternative is an educational practice that seeks first and foremost to interrogate the concrete historical situation. It seeks to reveal, through critical reflection, the manifest variation of an essential contradiction. The contradiction of oppression is often hidden, and as such hides the manifest possibility for liberation. Hence, the cruel double jeopardy of the oppressed, and the near impossibility of a genuine critique. In light of this radical alternative, educators, policy makers, parents, and students need to critically reflect on how we have come to view the "at-risk student" as deficient. I have been arguing that this characterization is inadequate and harmful. It is a construction that hides the essential contradiction that all students are oppressed, not just some, but all. It hides the fact that teachers are oppressed and that the dominant educational paradigm constitutes a concrete historical situation that obscures almost completely the possibility for true generosity and a liberatory pedagogy.

4. The moral imperative – "What can I do?"

It would seem that you and I have already taken steps toward a critical pedagogy. I have written, and you have read. The preceding argument is, in its own meager way, a critical reflection on our concrete historical situation. By critically dismantling the assumptions and pre-dispositions that underpin the deficit model of students "at risk," we have taken steps to reveal the contradiction of our own oppression. I would humbly submit that this paper is a critical pedagogy insofar as it is grounded in a critical reflection. Still, there is more to be done. First, teachers, parents, politicians and students must relinquish the deficit model of students at risk. It is a harmful, insidious construction that provides a permanent fount for poverty and despair. Moreover, this

conceptualization of "the at-risk student" precludes us from the practice of true generosity, and imprisons us within a hegemonic discourse void of a genuine moral framework. In the absence of such a framework, all our practices, particularly those that fall under the rubric "education," become mere technologies.

To undo this pernicious technocracy, teachers and students must reflect critically on the essential contradiction; that they are both teachers AND students. As teacher/students and student/teachers we embody a contradiction in which we are simultaneously complicit in both the cause of our oppression and the possibility of our liberation. How this contradiction is manifest in our own concrete historical situation will vary. Nevertheless, it is our historical and ontological vocation (our telos) to find in these manifest contradictions the seeds of our own becoming. The ethical and moral payoff in this alternate view comes about by virtue of the fact that in critical reflection we find the moral framework that allows for a genuine critique of the concrete historical situation. We are able, thereby, to see the root causes of our oppression; not as some impenetrable historical accident, but rather as the concrete manifestation of a human made history.

A Freirean alternative requires a radical re-orientation to history, yet need not be postponed until after the revolution. On the contrary, the revolution must await our critical pedagogy. Freire points out that:

> Indeed, the interests of the oppressors lie in "changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them"; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation, the more easily they can be dominated. (p. 55)

Likewise, it is in the interests of the oppressed to take charge of their own consciousness through the practice of critical reflection. What we find in every concrete historical situation is a certain domination of consciousness in the form of ideology. A critical pedagogy asks student/teachers and teacher/students to compete with these discursive formations through a genuine critical reflection. True generosity consists in discovering for ourselves, and for others, how to engage in a critical reflection on the concrete historical situation.

There is a teaching that goes something like this: "give me a fish, and you feed me for a day; teach me to fish and you feed me for a lifetime." I recently saw an updated version that takes into account the current historical situation. The newer version goes like this: "give me a fish, and you feed me for a day; teach me to fish, and you feed me until the river is contaminated or the shoreline is seized; teach me to organize, and I can join together with my peers and we will fashion our own solution." The wisdom contained in these teachings consists in the moral imperative to liberate ourselves from the chains of our own oppression. Armed with this wisdom we must undertake to critique all our practices. That is the challenge, the hope and the promise of a Freirean alternative; the possibility for a genuine critique; the possibility for true generosity; and the possibility of a moral ground on which to stand.

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